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# 'Makes you think?' How videogames have a history of neglecting to challenge social conventions

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## Abstract

Contemporary art by its nature has always challenged the viewer and the institutions that support it. Film grew up in a time of political establishments being questioned, rising and falling. Modern music, too, was brought to the masses in a time of political change and learned disobedience. But games, and videogames in particular, are different. Videogames, even though they are the chosen medium of a troubled generation dogged by the political instability of faltering economics, do not attempt at political discontent or relevant social expression on a level even close to other forms. In order for games to fully utilise their status as an art form and challenge the systems around them, their creators should examine the legacy of contemporary art and popular music culture, and not merely try to make video games 'fun'.

**Keywords:** games, contemporary art, music, political establishment, dissent

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## 1. Introduction

Videogames, almost by default, challenge the mental dexterity of their players, so why do games so infrequently challenge their audience's views? As musician and commentator, Henry Rollins, described:

"All you need is one guy, or one girl, to stand up and say "\*\*\*\* this", and everyone goes, 'Voice of a generation, thank you, I've been thinking that, I never had the guts to stand up and say it'."<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary art by its nature has always challenged the viewer and the institutions that support it. The film industry evolved in a time of political establishments being questioned, rising and falling: first Fascism, and then Marxist communism, challenged a hopeful and optimistic America where the streets were still paved with gold. Modern music, too, was brought to the masses in a time of political change and learned disobedience, with a wave of free love, psychedelia and yellow submarines, only to itself be usurped within the decade by an angry youth who had managed to learn four chords and express themselves. But games, videogames in particular, are different. Videogames, even though they are the chosen medium of a troubled generation, dogged by the political instability of a faltering economics, do not attempt at political discontent or relevant social expression on a level even close to other forms.

Filmmaker, Jim Jarmusch, elegantly commented that this is fundamental to any art form:

"It's always very important for iconoclastic artists to upset things."<sup>1</sup>

You could say that videogames were born under the looming desperation of the Cold War, a suspicious time when questioning the status quo could get you blacklisted; where McCarthyist-era thinking meant creatives who questioned the power of capitalism were traitors. According to Hussey:

'The world witnessed the birth of video games at the beginning of the space race. One of the first known video games, *Spacewar!*, was created at MIT in 1962 ... The game was inaccessible to a larger audience because, at the time, universities were the only places where computers could be found.'<sup>2</sup>

However, videogames only reached the public domain via coin-operated arcades in the early 1970s. This fledgling art form was only really beginning its genesis in a world that seemed to be celebrating the triumph of Western capitalism through the apparent diminishing and downgrading of any substantial potential socio-political alternatives.

Arguably, much of Punk's political power was neutered as soon as it was commercialised in the late 1970s, making itself a paradox. As described by Professor Barry Shank:

'...(the) English punk rock rhetoric of revolution, destruction, and anarchy was articulated by means of specific pleasures of consumption requiring the full industrial operations that were ostensibly the objects of critique.'<sup>3</sup>

By this time Punk was already largely considered dead as a mode for challenging the establishment, and concurrently videogames were so underdeveloped that they could only be seen as entertainment. There would be no cultural osmosis between the dying and the newborn, but there may have been some latent genetic inheritance.

It could be true to say that games have grown up as a consumer product unwilling to challenge the dominant philosophy that has made it so monetarily rich. Videogames as they currently exist do not bite the hand that feeds. Videogames had their formative years in the 1980s, back when Gordon Gecko so famously epitomised the times in which "greed is good" (*Wall Street*, 1987). Capitalism has been fantastic for videogames – these big, expensive things to create – which, as long as they don't rock the boat or ask too many questions, have been able to sell units and continue in an affluent cycle. However, things in the world, and in games, are changing.

## 2. Examples of expression and dissent in other art forms

### 2.1. Contemporary art

Modern and contemporary art has constantly challenged the foundations it was built upon. The post-impressionist movement that was the precursor to modern art, sought to undermine the salon system and set about a new movement of art appreciators and creators with different values to that of the old guard.

### *'Fountain' and the Birth of Modern Art*

Marcel Duchamp's seminal readymade sculpture *Fountain* (Duchamp, 1917), a mass produced porcelain urinal turned on its side and placed on a plinth, undermined the idea of what could and could not be called art. The idea of a 'ready-made' something manufactured and designed by another party, as a mass-produced object of utility, that has been presented by an artist other than its designer or creator; both literally and metaphorically turned 'art' on its side. Presenting an object or idea from a different angle like this, is largely considered the birth of modern art, and a foundational exhibition of early postmodernism. From this point on, everything could be considered art, and who or what the artist is would always be questionable.<sup>4</sup>

### *Abstraction and Picasso*

The turn of the century brought significant scientific and cultural disruption, and with that, Pablo Picasso, whose work attempted to express this. Picasso's pivotal role in Cubism showed that you did not need to radically change a form, such as painting, but just significantly readdress the lens through which it is approached. This paralleled the way people of the time had to readjust their world view.

'Whereas in the past, life had been static, science and technology were now forcing modern man to experience time, motion and space more dynamically...Furthermore, the ambiguity and sense of uncertainty generated by this new rush of stimuli was interpreted by the theory of relativity that evolved through F. H. Bradley, Whitehead, Einstein... What these philosophical theoreticians suggested was that we live in a world of shifting perspectives, where the appearance of objects is in a constant flux depending on the point of view from which it is seen.' (Miami Dade College)<sup>5</sup>

Such a radical change in the perception of our world demanded an equally radical expression in art. This was compounded by the unsteady effect of early globalisation, thus having a relative view of a given subject matter became necessary. This brave new world ushered in a decade that spawned art movements desperate to interpret at a rate not seen before, or since. These included Dadaism, Modernism, Futurism, and Surrealism, but Cubism seemed to stand out as a distilled summary of them all.

'Perhaps we can say that Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* ushered in a revolutionary way of depicting reality. This landmark painting had broken all of the traditional rules that artists at the time followed... Picasso had decided to turn his back on a fixed point of view and harmonious proportion, concepts that had been religiously practiced since the Renaissance. Instead, he replaced these with multiple perspectives and distortion. Furthermore, he incorporated into his painting references to primitive art, a practice that ran counter to the ceremonious adulation of the whole continuum of Western art. For most people, *Les Femmes d'Alger* was a desecration of everything that had been held as sacred.' (Miami Dade College)<sup>5,6</sup>

This readjustment of how a viewer might approach a painting - not as purely abstract, but not as wholly representational either - gave a unique power to the representation of the political in modern painting. By the time Picasso had gotten around to painting what is now considered his seminal work, *Guernica* (1937), this mastery of cubism had come to represent the need to approach, abstract and analyse every and any subject from multiple angles. *Guernica* holds this detail in its own legend.<sup>7</sup>

'While living in Paris during the Nazi occupation, Picasso was harassed by the Gestapo. One officer is said to have seen a photograph of *Guernica* in Picasso's apartment and

asked, with disgust, “Did you do that?” Picasso responded, “No, you did.” (Charney, 2010)<sup>8</sup>

The fact that this ‘degenerate’ work survived and is held up as such an important act of rebellion highlights that critique of the establishment is possibly best done in new genres, movements, and art forms.

### 2.3. Shock and the YBA generation

In the more contemporary field, the idea of shocking with overt content and subverting with embedded art was a precedent set by artists of the Young British Artists (YBA) generation of the early 1990s. The Chapman Brothers continually manage to do this with their art, finding novel and interesting ways to reinvent and shock with each new body of work. This includes (i) defacing a set of Francisco Goya’s etchings in *Insult to Injury* (Chapman and Chapman, 2003) to refocus the attention of the viewer on the horrors of war; and, (ii) buying water colours created by the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, and painting over them to make them ‘happier’ in *If Hitler Had Been a Hippy How Happy Would We Be* (Chapman and Chapman, 2008); and, (iii) doing portrait sessions in the Frieze Art Fair of 2009, painting whatever they wanted to instead of the faces of the clients who paid to sit for them. The Chapman Brothers have constantly used their medium, materials and subject matter to question things outside of the work and its theme, subverting the very notion of the word ‘art’, without having to make an inaccessible postmodernist text such as Michael Craig-Martin’s *An Oak Tree* (1973).<sup>9-11</sup>

Art’s flavour of dissent or challenge within the medium essentially expresses that for a work to be truly subversive, it must challenge the very foundations it is built upon. It must question the nature of the objects considered expressive that went before it. It must reinvent the way in which its form is designed and created, and the angles from which it views or approaches a subject. It must either smack you in the face with a controversial message to distract you, only to gently slip a more thoughtful essay into your coat pocket, or even further abstract itself so that the message it wishes its viewers to digest must be unravelled, sought, and found. Art must abstract on some level, if not to hide its true meaning from censorship, at least to create a chase for meaning that the viewer must pursue.

For video games, this means the revolution of mechanics from the tropes we know well (the ones that were developed in the time when games were a non-social contributor and a form of pure entertainment), into something else, something more. For games to regularly challenge views it could be suggested they reinvent themselves more often, at all levels, and not just within the indie scene. Games have the ability to use their power as systems to approach subjects and themes from more than just one or two binary perspectives. If video games have anything to learn from contemporary art, it is the means to shock in a constructive way, a way that doesn’t sicken, a way that defies expectations instead of pandering to them.

### 2.4. Music

The historic musical movements that involved significant numbers of young people have always spoken truths, and they rejected being pushed into the insignificance of many of their mainstream counterparts. From the documentary and commentary on freshly historic events by young artists in the folk movement such as Bob Dylan, to the forecasting of political unrest, and even incitement asking listeners to act politically (e.g. The Clash), music has frequently featured mainstream practitioners adopting the messages of little known outsider, subversive, and rebellious peers.

### *The Folk Revival, Protest Songs and Bob Dylan*

Dylan showed that music with a political nature did not need to fall far from the tree of mainstream popularity. Folk music has always held deep and meaningful stories centrally. By definition, it is a local form, one passed through and developed within communities. By the time recorded music became an accessible and regular staple of everyday life in the 1950s, folk had been left behind for the vigour and sensation of swing, and not long after, rock and roll. Dylan, however, saw through this. At first he learned to play and love the rhapsody associated with mainstream music, but later he considered it to be empty:

"The thing about rock 'n' roll is that ... it wasn't enough ... There were great catchphrases and driving pulse rhythms ... but the songs weren't serious or didn't reflect life in a realistic way. I knew that when I got into folk music, it was more of a serious type of thing. The songs are filled with more despair, more sadness, more triumph, more faith in the supernatural, much deeper feelings." (Dylan, 1985)<sup>12</sup>

When he discovered folk music, it had not been forgotten, but it had stayed local. It was time to take this provocative form and place it on the mainstream table. Dylan's take on the folk revival echoed 'the times they are a- changing' rather uniquely in a world of music and hip shakes constructed to make fan girls faint. Dylan struck a chord possibly deeper than he could have imagined, and with that move, he became a reluctant figurehead for social unrest. A number of Dylan's early songs, such as *Blowin' in the Wind* and *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, became international hits covered by bands such as Peter Paul and Mary, Joan Baez, The Byrds, Sonny and Cher, and due to their electrifying content, became anthems for the US civil rights and anti-war movements.

'The songs often took as their subject matter contemporary, real life stories, with *Only A Pawn In Their Game* addressing the murder of civil rights worker Medgar Evers; and the Brechtian 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll' the death of black hotel barmaid Hattie Carroll, at the hands of young white socialite William Zantzinger.' (Ricks, 2003)<sup>13, 14</sup>

Dylan also focused his lyrical attention on the broader socio-political themes brought on by the country's economic position:

'*Ballad of Hollis Brown* and *North Country Blues* address the despair engendered by the breakdown of farming and mining communities.' (Williams, 1991)<sup>15</sup>

#### *'Only a Pawn in Their Game'*

Dylan's *Only a Pawn in Their Game* tells the story of the assassination of civil rights activist Medgar Evers. Written by Dylan and released on 1964's *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, the song suggested that Evers' assassin was only a fraction of where the blame for the tragedy should be apportioned, as the hatred stirred up by politicians to incense the impoverished white community against the black community was used as a distraction to gain leverage and fame while "...the poor white remains, On the caboose of the train, But it ain't him to blame, He's only a pawn in their game" (Dylan, 1964).<sup>13</sup>

Dylan's commitment to informally chronicling the social abuses of the time not only made his voice louder on the musical stage, but helped his music reach corners deeper than the musical form itself could previously manage to reach:

'Civil rights activist Bernice Johnson would later tell critic Robert Shelton that "'Pawn' was the very first song that showed the poor white was as victimized by discrimination as the

poor black. The Greenwood people didn't know that Pete [Seeger], Theo[dore Bikel] and Bobby [Dylan] were well known. (Seeger and Bikel were also present at the registration rally.) They were just happy to be getting support. But they really like Dylan down there in the cotton country.' (Shelton, 2011)<sup>16</sup>

Games, as they seem to be now, have yet to find their Bob Dylan. The form has developed into a rock and roll phase, with pulsing rippling rhythm, but it has not yet developed a sense of serious content. If there was a folk equivalent of meaningful, heartfelt games, it would now be time for a Dylan to take them and infuse them with the contemporary social unrest we see around us and put them on the same stage as rock and roll stage.

### *Punk and The Clash*

Within a decade, the folk meaning and vitriol started to combine with the hard pulsating rhythms of rock and roll – the birth of punk rock. Along with this realisation of the power of extravagance and show, as well as the raw energy afforded by rock, came a distaste for its development into the inaccessible, self congratulatory, winding of Prog Rock self-indulgence. New comers with less musical talent started honing down the core principles of rock and lacing it with lyrical references from their troubled perspectives as outsiders. Meaningful and troubling lyrical works started to flow in, and the socio-political strength of folk music had started to be fused with the raw power of rock.

This happened on a smaller 'folk scale' for some time, before the tides eventually turned and those artists who had become expert and helped develop this form exploded in to the mainstream. The Clash was one of these bands. The Clash took what was at times describes as a painful and anti-musical structure, and gave it a more worldly and wise vibe. One of the principle catalysts was Don Letts introducing the band to 'dub' music (a music that held deep and penetrating grooves at its core), then taking licks from more mainstream music like funk and disco, all the while retaining the raw energy of their punk heritage. The band made punk audible and digestible to the mainstream, but their lyrics continued to be cutting and subversive.

### *'Guns of Brixton'*

The Clash wrote songs that reflected the social frustrations of the youth in London. The magic is that instead of just chronicling the events, The Clash often wrote lyrics that summed up bubbling tensions and consequently, forecast political instabilities to come.

'*The Guns of Brixton* pre-dates the riots that took place in the 1980s in Brixton but the lyrics depict the feelings of discontent that were building due to heavy-handedness of the police that led to the riots, the recession and other problems at that time. Paul Simonon was originally doubtful about the song's lyrics, which discuss an individual's paranoid outlook on life, but was encouraged to continue working on it by Strummer.' (Sweeting, 2004)<sup>17</sup>

### *'White Riot'*

But The Clash went further: rather than merely describe paranoid outlooks and forecast trouble ahead, they incited political involvement. 1979's *White Riot* album advocated the white youth to riot if they wanted change, instead of going to school, doing as they are told, and being afraid of jail. The song was written after Joe Strummer and the bassist, Paul Simonon, were involved in the riots at the Notting Hill Carnival of 1976.

'Lyrically, the song is about class economics and race and thus proved controversial: some people thought it was advocating a kind of race war.' (Letts, 2000) <sup>18</sup>

The racial controversy was unfounded. This was made clear by The Clash's involvement in the Rock Against Racism march and concert of 1978, playing *White Riot* at Victoria Park in defiance of east London's Fascist and National Front groups. Joe Strummer was attempting to appeal to white youths to find a worthy cause to riot alongside black people in the UK who were already fed up. The song reveals its anti-establishment message "Are you taking over / Or are you taking orders? / Are you going backwards / Or are you going forwards?" (Strummer, 1977) <sup>19</sup>

If videogames are starting to develop their punk movement, their zines, and their 'garage band' 4 chord creators, they have not reached their The Clash style apex yet. Production value in small meaningful developers is still thin on the ground. The games do not borrow consistently enough from their mainstream successful counterparts - partly through lack of expertise, partly through lack of time available, and partly through the fact that mainstream games have themselves to be honed successfully down to the most successful/enjoyable elements (instead of choosing the route of 'core' audiences, and overcomplicated or bloated mechanics, goals, and narratives).

### 3. The search for equivalence in videogames

"This is a public service announcement..." with Joysticks! "Know your rights!" (Strummer, 1982) <sup>20</sup>

Games are finding their 'art,' 'folk,' and 'punk' tools. Anna Anthropy wrote, 'I want game creation to be decentralized. I want open access to the creative act for everyone. I want games as zines. It's a tall order, maybe, but the ladder's being built as you read these words.' Just as the grassroots movements of American revival folk and punk exploded a scene of outsiders, expressing their political and social concerns, so too are the tools and attitudes of game developers diversifying to a grassroots level. <sup>21</sup>

Videogame creation has remained an elite and inaccessible club. With an engineering degree in computer science being the opening hurdle required to expressions of self via the medium, it was a limited and self-selecting art form:

'Videogames as they're commonly conceived today both come from and contain exactly one perspective. It should be terrifying that an entire art form can be dominated by a single perspective, that a small and privileged group has monopoly on the creation of art.' (Anthropy, 2012) <sup>21</sup>

It will be this no longer. The availability of tools, and the explosion of learning that the internet has enabled, could not come at a better time. Outsiders are picking up videogame tools, learning the game development equivalent of Punk's four chords, and there is rippling undercurrent of games challenging the status quo.

The instruments are still not easy to learn, and they will never be as simple as the guitar, but even access to relatively complex game engines like Flash and Unity has meant that we have started to see games and interactive experiences revolving around more diverse subjects than ever. Mollendustria's *Unmanned* (Pederchini, 2012) depicts the banality of a day in the life of a drone pilot (see Figure 1); Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012) works through the tumultuous experience of gender identity disorder and undergoing hormone replacement therapy (see Figures 2a -2c). These

games challenge the preconceptions of their audiences and they provide a commentary on their times far different to that of mainstream games, or even film, art, and music.<sup>21, 22</sup>

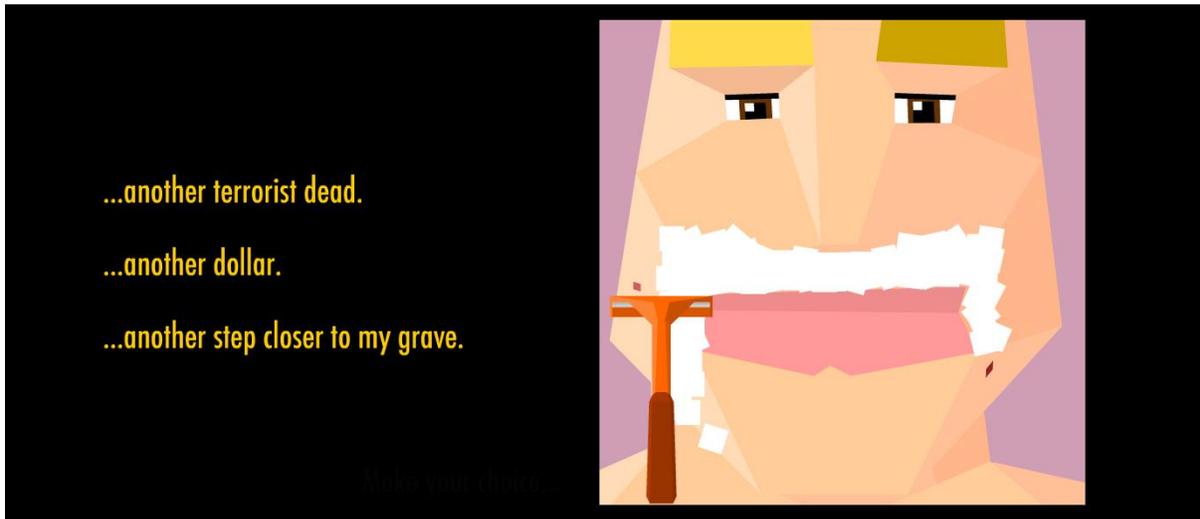


Figure 1: *Unmanned* (2012)



Figures 2a, 2b, 2c: screenshots from *Dys4ia* (2012)

As Jim Jarmusch pointed out:

"You only need 5% [of people] or less, to...embrace ideas and change [things], and you know, change the way people think all over again."<sup>1</sup>

If this is the case, then we seem to have the early modernist, folk, and punk adopters of our art form, the New York Dolls of videogames. Yet they are still very much the raw and unpolished examples of a first wave equivalent in punk terms. The field of videogames is starting to challenge. Indie developers are now being taken seriously by platform holders like Microsoft and Sony, something undreamt of just a few years ago. The creations of small developers are becoming far more polished artefacts. But for the time being, even the majority of independent developers are unwilling to make statements that challenge. The innate user-based values embedded by games bridging the worlds of design and art, means that they must address functionality as much as expressiveness. They must approach their audience as a user and ensure they are not too offended or disgruntled. Games are still growing out of the need to be 'fun', something that doesn't have to, but can, contravene subversion.

In order for games to fully utilise their status as an art form and challenge the systems around them, they must learn from punk and contemporary art and ignore the design requirement of 'fun' or subvert it into irreverence.

## 4. Elements

So what does it take for an art form to develop a voice of dissent? What are the common elements between other art forms that make them a socially expressive medium?

### 4.1. Voice

A relevant 'voice' requires that the medium challenges and interrogate subjects from more than just binary standpoints. Questioning and challenging art forms elicit irreverence – they question critique and poke fun at their own systems, the systems that support them and the assumptions of their audiences.

Even the populist end of socially relevant art forms borrow from the non commercial, self distinguishing, and niche – strong art forms cross-pollinate over their entire discipline and furnish the ideas of outsider artists. In videogames this may work for indies that have found commercial success, as well as the established 'AAA' mainstream. Folk and punk's resounding and trans-generational successes often borrowed from a previous generation of outsider artists, from their own genres and others. Art forms with voice don't stick to a dogmatic need to entertain or be 'fun'.

### 4.2. Diversity of artists and access to creative tools

Socially relevant art forms are built out of grassroots movements, and tools, scenes and places for collaboration. The videogames industry is possibly the flattest and most sharing one on the planet, as it is not individuated or given market strength purely by technological advantage, and so there is no incentive to hoard such knowledge.

Yet it is heavily driven by innovation of technology and facilitated by the Internet, meaning it evolves at a speed unseen in other entertainment media. The 'hacker' mentality of many of the earliest creators of videogames still runs deep through the veins of the learning process. They are communal and anarchic, and just want data and information to be free. Sharing is a cornerstone of game development.

With the expertise and tools barriers now coming down, and the ability for a small voice to be heard resoundingly over the internet, games are steadily approaching a folk or punk-like grassroots apex for creators. As long as we see this continue to diversify as a group, we will see significant development of the medium.

### 4.3. Expertise

Relevant artists are experts or virtuosos in their fields. This is a factor driven by diversity over time; as the expertise of those with fresh perspectives come into the creator sphere and their technical knowledge grows over time, we will see more outsider creators taken seriously in the mainstream and not just analysed by other developers and forward-looking critics.

#### 4.4. Production value

The seminal works that have something to say about a time or to a generation have a consistent (if not polished) aesthetic. These artefacts and their quality must be able to stand the test of time to remain relevant. Wise choices by smaller teams or individuals, the reduction in length and scope of games, episodic structures, and the continual evolution of tools, require that the production value, palatability, and lifetime of more meaningful, smaller or outside games is on the up. Surely the factor of time is also at play - as outsiders have more regular success, their careers as interactive artists and creators will develop and evolve. Production value will be driven by three factors: (i) expertise, (ii) evolution of tools, and (iii) revision of the form into more manageable short form experiences as well as the epic 50+ hour endeavour.

#### 4.5. Market

Iconoclastic artists embrace the market, but we should not let it be their master. Games need to embrace but not pander to the market. If anything has been regularly proven, running directly against current trends will get you noticed at the very least, and if your work is good, it could become seminal. As Henry Rollins pointed out,

"Lou Reid and his crew making this atonal music, coming from art, and heroin and death, in the middle of...feel good, that's punk rock."<sup>1</sup>

Art, punk, folk, niche, outsider and 'other' videogames will have the increasing ability to stand out, which inherently makes them commercially viable. If that can be embraced without being corrupted by commerciality, then you have powerful venom in your creations. Glenn Branca put it well when he said,

"You're kickin' ass, you're doing something new, and you don't give a \*\*\*\* about...commerciality, and that's what Punk is."<sup>1</sup>

But sub-culture or punk is not just about rejecting commerciality; if anything, the death of punk has shown that you cannot sustainably do so. It's about becoming resilient to it. Embracing new markets, digital distribution, and market disruption, 'pay-what-you-want', DRM-free (Digital Rights Management)...these have all been the *avant garde* tools of breakthrough outsiders and indies, and to that extent are a kind of punk capitalism. Videogames stand the best chance of being challenging by forging a commercial viability at the same time as a populist resilience.

### 5. The shortfall in games

#### 5.1. Conformity

When measured internally, there are dots of possibility creeping into the mainstream games space, but when held up against the larger fold of artistic expression as a whole, games fall flat on their face as an arbiter of social commentary. *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013) for instance, is a work of great depth at times, a game with the intension of exploring numerous socio-political threads:<sup>23</sup>

'Religious zealotry, American Exceptionalism, theories of space-time and interdimensionality, patriotic jingoism, the inevitability of economic disparity, Occupy Wall Street, postcolonial theory, and problems faced by political radicalism. It's a beautifully

sophisticated game on many thematic levels, and while not every strand is followed to a conclusion, it piques interest, causes uncanny discomfort, and provokes conversation.' (Wong, 2013)<sup>24</sup>

But for all its efforts at challenging ideas of patriotism, colonialism, and power, it is inevitably held back by the design norms of the First Person Shooter (FPS) format it is presented in. This type of design conformity, baying to the expectations of a consumer audience, means that this text and the many others that came before and may follow will never meet the lofty ambitions for which their content has been designed:

'As valiantly as it tries to explore social-political issues, *Infinite* is tethered to its mechanical nature as a shooter in ways that undermine its aspirations. It's possible to love the game for all it tries to do, but still feel smothered by its insistence that so much of our experience is delivered staring down the barrel of a gun or other deadly weapons. The issue isn't about being pro- or anti- shooter games; it's about how standard FPS design limits the narrative possibilities of a game that clearly aspires to dig deep. How might I have behaved, and how might I have reflected on *Infinite*'s provocative world, had I not spent so much time shooting or avoiding being shot? The game's story isn't really about shooting at all, but the player's lived story is, and that collision is impossible to overcome.' (Abbott, 2013)<sup>25</sup>

## 5.2. Consumerism

The *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) series (DMA/Rockstar, 1997-2013) was originally held up as the first commercially successful videogame series to roll in any real social commentary. With its close-to-the-bone satirical portrayal of greed and the dark side of America's flagship cities set against the unique and satirically-framed backdrop of 'pasted' time periods, GTA at first created an uncanny and uncomfortable world in which to confront some of the difficult truths of our time.

"The 'mayhem' thing, the freedom thing. I remember when that was an actual feature of *Grand Theft Auto: ...Vice City ...* in the mad, manic excesses of 1980s Miami. You killed every gyrating bunny in a dance club because you could: not just because there was a freshness to the gesture, a newness, a transgressive excitement, but because the garish world felt so silly, so impermanent. You never even dirtied your awful polyester...It was a story of a set of values in a certain time, just like *San Andreas*, a hyper-textured early-90s hip-hop video -- where you could also drive...weary and wary, through the fires of the L.A. race riots. That was a thing." (Alexander, 2013)<sup>26</sup>

The *lassaiz faire* attitude to hyper-violence and mayhem in these earlier titles was helped along by the construct it placed itself within. It was pushing boundaries, and it was shocking the viewer with the things it gave a player as tasks to achieve. It was a social comment because it would surprise and force you to do awful things because they were enjoyable and intoxicating. The early GTA games matched the work of the Chapman Brothers for shock value and social commentary – there was public hysteria and the Red Top, Rag, and Tabloid press spoke of them as if they were rock and roll to a generation of petrified parents in the 1950s. The early GTAs were 'The devils music'. They are no longer.

The Hauser brothers knew about the media outrage that their sharp and divisive title, *GTAV* (DMA/Rockstar, 2001) would provoke, and that it could only spell success for them through increased publicity. The allure of the forsaken, and the heightened sense of criminality or subversion

engendered just by inserting the disc, does not make it any less art. But as they rolled more instalments out, the notion of shock was clearly no longer an innovation within the game world; it was part of the marketing story. This has not been a failure; GTA has managed to increase its player base significantly with each new release in the series. They are hugely 'successful' games. The warm glow of the notion of popularity, and the riches that are delivered with it, is a siren's call that too often lands games developers on the rocks of insignificance. As each major title rolls to the tastes of the consumer, any bite it had left, as a game that challenges or subverts, fades:

"This is like watching your sharp, witty father...telling old fart jokes as his mind slows down. And as much as the internet is habituated to defending GTA as 'satire', what is it satirizing, if everything is either sad or awful? Where is the 'satire' when the awful parts no longer seem edgy or provocative, [or] just attempt at catch-all 'offense' that aren't honed enough to even connect?" (Alexander, 2013)<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, there is diminishing room for an exploration of these themes as the audience expects the game to become more in-depth, and the familiar mechanics (adopted to make these games remain mainstream) smothers the feeling of anarchism provoked by the originals in the series:

"With all the talk about 'open world', 'mayhem' and 'power fantasy', it's easy to forget how confined the Grand Theft Auto series now feels. All of that endless vista, and you with your eyes too-often glued to the mini-map. Orbiting missions and objectives that dot your map like bites to be scratched. You have to shoot. For a game defined by its attitude to freedom and openness, it gives you very little liberty to escape its structure." (Alexander, 2013)<sup>26</sup>

If the Hauser Brothers had a moment where it looked like they might become the Chapman Brothers of the virtual world, or *les viruelle Enfants Terribles*, it, in retrospect, was fleeting. *Grand Theft Auto* – the godfather of interactive socio-political satire – has been slain by the consumer.

### 5.3. Adolescence

Irreverence and subversion in games is historically childish. Some Flash games on portals have been hosting games one could call subversive or irreverent for some time, but these have often been crass, hyper-violent, or offensive, rather than invoke concise, critical thinking. They have more often included amateurish attempts to explore or express various acts of violence and terrorism, whether it be the Oklahoma bombing, the Virginia Tech Massacre, bombing Osama Bin Laden, or games about mutilation and torture. Not very often have there been games that challenged social norms or were subversive, without being base, or resorting to crass humour instead of genuine satire.

### 5.4. Glimmers of hope

The increasing ease with which folk are able to create games has meant that Stencyl, Twine, and other tools now provide a platform for non-game developers and game developers alike to finally turn around games in just a few hours and with relative ease, finally diversifying the output to much more than that of Flash portals. As Anna Anthropy champions, we are now starting to see a movement of 'freaks, normals, amateurs, artists, dreamers, dropouts, queers, housewives, and people like you... taking back an art form'. Outsiders are finally getting in and looking at diverse subjects from diverse angles via the lens of video games. But it still doesn't outweigh the influence of dross and violence out there, on both Flash portals and in the mainstream.

Even with this development, we don't see a more in-depth exploration of many of the subjects the 'outsiders' are visiting. So what is getting in the way?

## 6. Barriers and excuses

### 6.1. Jittery platform holders

Some of the most universally accessible platforms are unable to handle criticism of even the systems around them. The App Store has always had fuzzy admission criteria that it has managed to use as grounds for stamping out reference to some of the gaming tropes that many of us don't mind being left unedited. However, the store has been accused of filtering out critical opinion and anti-Apple sentiment. This has included games that could harm Apple's commercial interests directly, such as Mollendustria's *Phone Story* (Pedercini, 2011) which tracked the social malevolencies of the production of a smart phone. It has also been problematic for developers exploring social topics to which Apple are indirectly related. LittleLoud's Channel 4-commissioned *Sweatshop*, a game exploring labour exploitation in third world manufacturing, was pulled from the App Store. The resulting loss of revenue stream ultimately played a part in the studio's closure.<sup>27, 28</sup>

### 6.2: Safe institutions

There have been some very committed public bodies that have sought ways to seed the creation of conscientious games about specific educational subjects, whether it be Channel 4, The Wellcome Trust, The Science Museum, or the Tate in the UK (and also many more bodies associated with the 'Games For Change' movement in the USA). Such funding often ties games to the institution's own educational objectives, which can be counterproductive to creating games that truly explore fringe or subversive issues. Fundamentally, public institutions too often lack the courage to fund anti-establishment or outsider thinking or expression. Even games on relatively open platforms that have had successful funding from public institutions can end up being censored. Take, for example, *Pipe Trouble* (Jansen, 2013) a video game commissioned by TVO (Television Ontario). This game explored the trials and tribulations of being a fossil fuel pipeline construction firm. The main challenge in the gameplay was to try to weigh up the demands of your profit-focused investors and shareholders, versus the concerns of the people living in the places you were building the pipeline. If your pipeline spills and causes too much pollution in a given area, eventually the protesters will blow up and sabotage it. When *Pipe Trouble*'s trailer was released, it took heavy fire for advocating eco-terrorism, and spooked the public body responsible for funding and hosting the game into 'pulling' it. The commotion went further when the Alberta Premier, Alison Redford, called for the public body to be put under further scrutiny. Public bodies are not currently resilient enough to fund the development of games that ask serious questions of their subject, in the way that they currently fund documentaries that do.<sup>29, 30</sup>

## 7. The Future

### 7.1. Digital distribution

With the emergence of digital distribution and the recent development of the micro-console opening up competition in the living room gaming space, platforms have become more open than ever on the whole. Many of the hurdles and gatekeepers that we would have blamed for keeping dissident subject matter held back are actually melting away. Even the most notoriously controlling console giants are

now in the process of making full self-publishing available to developers. This means gatekeepers can't really be an excuse anymore.

## 7.2. Production value - where is The Clash or the Bob Dylan of videogames?

Games that have something socially interesting to say are often made quickly and cheaply by those outside the industry, and so their content has a limited reach. They are the garage bands or the 'zinesters' of the expressive generation of games creators. They are the equivalents of Protopunk; they are the MC5 and the New York Dolls. Perhaps we already have a parallel to The Stooges (Figure 3) in our videogame midst.



Figure 3: *Funhouse* album cover (The Stooges, 1970)

Games are time-consuming and complex artefacts to even think about making. Even as the tools become easier and more accessible to those without an education in engineering, and publishing platforms become more open, we still have to find ways to fund the time these fledgling artists spend on writing, exploring, and thinking, as well as developing, and increasing aesthetic quality in, games.

A good example of this is the reach of *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012; Figure 4). As a Source Engine mod, it garnered 100,000 free downloads, (Pinchbeck, Curry, 2013) but it was still niche and difficult for anyone but those "in the know" to find and install. When the developers, The Chinese Room, chose to enhance the aesthetic quality of the game, the hype that followed meant they could put it out via Steam. *Dear Esther* recently achieved over 750,000 downloads in paid sales (Pinchbeck, Curry, 2013), a >700% increase in its transition from a free product to what some might call a premium one. It is undeniable that the leap in production value contributed to this huge increase in downloads, a trend-bucking strong valuation of itself as a worthy cultural product.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 4: *Dear Esther* (2012)

If a true surge in the popularity of challenging games is to occur, their developers need time, and often that requires funding. By its nature, crowd funding will only work to help certain pockets of niche markets, and will, in its current state, be likely to fail to fully support the development of truly anti-establishment or subversive games. This is because of people's lack of awareness of the truly marginalised or subversive issues, and this ignorance alone could inhibit crowd-sourced support, which, ultimately, is a numbers game (i.e. you must win the backing of a certain number of people pledging a certain net level of funding). Crowd-funding might offer a solution, but will not lift the shackles entirely from the most disruptive and challenging of ideas.

Games, however, are starting to garner their own rich patrons and benefactors whose only criteria is that the piece in question be a game they believe has the potential to be great. These benefactors are often successful indie developers, and as the pool of successful indie developers becomes more diverse, hopefully, so too will the games they select for funding and support. This peer-based system may be the fastest route available to raising the profile of challenging games. This only criterion ensures that the games chosen are great games, for their own sake, rather than purely explorations of subjects that could have used any other medium.

## 8: Conclusion

So how can we turn videogames into a vehicle for social commentary? How do the founder artists, the outsiders, with great intentions and little reach, i.e. the New York Dolls, prove their equivalence to other art forms such as music, where a rebellious creator can reach as many people as the highly commercialised product can? When will a game put into context the sorts of issues that preceded the Brixton Riots, in the same way The Clash's *The Guns of Brixton* did?

There is some evidence for innovative founders in the video games medium, and we have a market proving that this level of expression is niche, but has a viable consumer base. Game-making tools are

becoming democratised to the point, not only at which outsiders and amateurs start to develop socially expressive interactive experiences, but also when they can experience a viable market for these expressions. This is to the point at which the level of expertise needed for production is closer to that expected of mainstream games, and therefore reaches out to the average consumer. Outsider games have a route to becoming seminal. It is hoped, most likely over the next 10 years, that we may see the emergence of the Duchamp's, Picasso's, Chapman Brothers', Clash's, and Dylan's of videogames. Socially expressive videogames are already here, and when their market reach matches that of a top indie game or an average AAA title, videogames will have joined the ranks of our other socially expressive media, or perhaps even outstripped them. For with truly socially expressive games comes the opportunity for players to understand and solve the social models they explore, and not just to hear about them.

Games currently do not tend to deal with the contemporary, controversial, or political often enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with other 'high art'. As a systems based society however, they may be the best placed to perform this role. As Rune Klevjer described, there is an inherent desire for meaningful experiences in games:

'Yes, we want to be free, to play, to master and to conquer, but we also want our actions to be meaningful within a mythical fictional universe. This is the paradox of make-believe, the contradiction between the given and the agency.' (Klevjer, 2002)<sup>32</sup>

However, Rune's justification also seemed to describe an inherent and unscaleable paradox between the meaningful and make-believe. This can be the case no longer. It is about time videogames made us think, so that our actions inside them can be meaningful on more than just an internal level. Meaning does not have to just take place 'within a mythical fictional universe'.

Games can become counterculture systems, artefacts of new or alternative thinking. Games as punk, folk or art systems could turn the tide against the depolitization of countercultures:

'Part of what has become the hegemonic discourse of subculture is a misrepresentative depolitization of subcultures; the notion that subcultures were and are little more than hairstyles, quaint slang, and pop songs. In the prism of nostalgia, the politics and ideologies of subcultures are often stripped from them.' (Clark, 2003)<sup>33</sup>

Nostalgia in games is not achievable without a system to back it up. An anarchistic or counter-culture game could not be represented without an attempt to abstract and simplify such a system into a set of mechanics or a model. Incidentally, could games become the only unbreakable revision of counterculture, of punk? Punk was destroyed as commoditisation made its aesthetic replicable without its content:

'One danger [that] industrial pop culture poses to subsequent generations of dissident youth subcultures is that these youths may mistake style as the totality of prior dissent.' (Clark, 2003)<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, punk games could be untouchable from this anti-counterculture technique perpetuated by the mainstream:

'...games are pretty unique, compared to the other cultural things we study. Even though the structuralists tried to describe many things as being based on very simple underlying structures, we know now that this probably isn't true.'

'This means that games belong to a formal/algorithmic domain, whereas stories belong in the interpretative domain. Games have to have formally defined rules to be games, and stories, being based on interpretation, are not formally defined.' (Juul, 2000)<sup>34</sup>

Punk died because its narrative was hijacked and reinterpreted by the mainstream as (being) just the consumable items of fashion and entertainment. Games have been perceived as weak in terms of their narrative form (narratives are interpretive forms and cannot be easily formalised), but this weakness could also be their unique resilience against mainstream manipulation. Games have always been seen or labelled as hollow and vacuous, because ultimately, their systems were. But games cannot be reinterpreted so easily, as they are more concrete representations than that of a narrative. If we could create systems with meaning, systems that challenge society's own prevailing systems, we could create a resilient counter-culture. A form that champions systems over style, that doesn't just represent counter-culture, but models and develops mastery of it within the audience. A form with systems, that are overt, and which cannot be coerced without being noticed. A form that, even with commoditisation (counter-culture's great weakness), is not replicated into hollow forms.

Let this generation, sick and tired of vacuous interactive systems, make the new resilient counterculture interactive. Let us make punk, folk, Zine and outsider art games. Not only that - let this generation make video game equivalents of The Clash, Bob Dylan and Pablo Picassos, and create interactive experiences and a commodifiable, digitally distributed counter-culture, whose messages cannot be easily broken by popularity, as they are deeply embedded at the heart of the system.

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